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ABSTRACT

In 1992 the government of New South Wales, Australia, announced its commitment to a program of quality-assurance reviews of schools. The New South Wales school system plans to implement a quality-assurance system, which is process-based on the following: a primary focus on student learning, clear and shared direction, focused involvement and ownership among key stakeholders, decision making based on quality information, an emphasis on both process and outcomes, schools as learning organizations with an orientation toward continuous improvement, and proactive planning. This paper describes a quality system, quality assurance, and a quality-management system. It also discusses strategies for developing quality systems in schools and at the system level. The role of the Quality Assurance Directorate is outlined. A conclusion is that quality assurance cannot guarantee students' learning outcomes, but can be used as a means for continual improvement in an ever-changing organizational context. One figure is included. (LMI)

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WILL THE SUN RISE TOMORROW? QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

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Will the Sun Rise Tomorrow? Quality Assurance and the Future of Education

Introduction

During 1992 the New South Wales Government announced its commitment to a program of quality assurance reviews of schools and of the services and programs provided to schools by the Department of School Education. The high level of commitment of the Minister of Education and Youth Affairs and the Department of School Education to the introduction of an effective quality assurance process was signalled by the appointment of an Assistant Director–General to establish and lead this initiative. This position provides the role of assuring quality with a voice at the department's senior decision making forum — State Executive meetings—and reports directly to the Director–General of Education.

During the last two terms of 1992 I held over 100 meetings with principals, other school staff, parent groups and peak bodies with a direct interest in the quality of schooling. A paper bringing together the key issues raised in these meetings will soon be made available to facilitate further discussion as part of the consultative process and development necessary in introducing a system of quality assurance for NSW public schools.[1] The Department has a strong commitment to actively involving all stakeholder groups in the development and implementation of an enhanced quality assurance system in public schools.

Primary development work for quality assurance reviews of schools will be undertaken during the first two terms this year. This process will involve review teams working with schools to ascertain the best ways to conduct such reviews to achieve the joint objectives of providing for public accountability and making a constructive contribution to the development of the schools. Continuous improvement is a fundamental feature of the quality assurance systems and the development of quality assurance system will itself be continuous and ongoing.

The development and implementation of an effective quality assurance system is still very much at an embryonic stage. We have thus far received widespread support for the introduction of quality assurance, as is evidenced from editorials in the Sydney Morning Herald and the Teachers Federation newspaper. We have also received strong support from the parent community and from the business community. This support provides a solid base on which to build as we work with school communities to develop a process to assure the quality of educational outcomes for our students.

[1] The Development of Quality Assurance Reviews in the NSW Public School System: What Works? Paper prepared for QA Regional Reference Groups, February 1993.

There is some concern and trepidation in schools about what quality assurance will mean for their work. Some staff outside of schools are also concerned about what it will mean for them. Some of this concern emanates from the fact that given our historical baggage we find it difficult to envisage a quality assurance review as anything other than an 'inspection'. The inspectorial perspective is deeply etched into the consciousness of educators in this and other school systems in Australia. If not addressed directly this perspective from 'old culture' could be a significant impediment to the development of an approach to quality assurance which is genuinely enabling, but which also provides for public accountability through the commitment of schools to achieve agreed outcomes which are of most relevance to their communities.

Will the Sun Rise Tomorrow?

The question posed in the title of this paper does not presage a thesis on Japanese schooling! We hear much of Sunrise industries and Tiger economies, but what I want to discuss is a less prosaic but more fundamental issue which was raised by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in the nineteenth century—the problem of induction. In the current context this translates into the question of whether we can be confident that our actions designed to achieve quality educational outcomes will in fact produce the desired results. For, if we cannot, then a system of planned and purposeful improvement is unlikely to be the best path to the future.

Although Hume was discussing induction in the context of natural phenomena, the cosmos in particular, the question of whether we can rely on the causal nature of actions and events in organisational change and development confronts the same fundamental issue: do constant conjunctions in the past say anything about their relationship in the future. Philosophers have laid whole forests to waste in their arguments about whether we can provide a demonstrative proof that induction can provide conclusive arguments about the causal relationship among phenomena. Does the fact that the sun has risen every day from the beginning of time say anything in answer to the question of whether it will rise again tomorrow? Likewise, does the fact that particular effective practices, such as planning and development processes which develop ownership among all stakeholder groups and have been identified as significant in effective schools mean that it is worth attempting to grow such cultures in other less effective schools.

Quality assurance is a process which is based on some fundamental understandings of what makes for effective organisational performance in schooling: a primary focus on student learning, clear and shared direction and purpose, focussed involvement and ownership among key stakeholder groups, decision making based on quality information, an emphasis on both process

and outcomes, schools as learning organisations with an orientation towards continuous improvement and a proactive stance towards their futures.

Most ordinary people do not worry about the philosopher's quandary about the sun rising tomorrow. Perhaps we should not worry too much about whether the effective practices we see in some schools are worth pursuing in all schools. Tomorrow will come and we will know soon enough whether the sun has risen. An approach to schooling that attempts to continuously incorporate and develop best practice—not average practice, but best practice—will place us in the strongest position to ensure that we provide students with access to the opportunities required for them to achieve the best possible outcomes.

This solution is in line with Karl Popper's response to Hume's question of induction. Popper argued that although the conjunction of events and actions is important in understanding the potential relationship between them, most of science is based on a criterion of falsifiability—that is, putting theories forward and attempting to falsify them. In the practical world the recognition of what appear to be best practices thus needs to be followed by testing whether they are in fact best. We do this all the time in schools in working out how to make things work effectively. We try what we think will work effectively, but continue to modify our approach until we do find what makes for effective practice.

It is important to make ourselves aware that across schools there is variability in the effectiveness of what we do. One of the fundamental aims of quality assurance is to improve the capacity of schools to recognise the essential organisational features necessary to provide an enriched environment for developing effective practice and provide a basis for referencing the effectiveness of practice across schools. This is a fundamental feature of schools as learning organisations, the opportunity to learn from each other through constructive reflection and dialogue on the effectiveness of their own processes and achievements.[2]

What is a Quality *System*?

Quality is defined in the quality assurance literature as *fitness for purpose*. In the context of our education system that can be translated as the capability of the system to deliver the best student outcomes available. This means that every one of us is involved in quality assurance in one way or another. A quality *system* can be described as the organisational structure, responsibilities, procedures, activities, capabilities, curriculum and resources that together aim to ensure that the education provided will satisfy the stated and implied needs of the clients of the system: students, parents, employers,

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[2] See Peter M. Senge The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation, Sydney: Random House (1992) for a discussion of learning organisations.

and others. This provides a general description of what the quality system we are developing should look at in terms of the effectiveness of schools.

In order to develop this quality system we must ensure that we have:

- a policy on the quality of the education to be provided
- clear organisational structures for delivering a quality education
- agreement about the most effective ways to achieve things in practice, including an understanding of the determinants of effectiveness in different contexts
- a set of procedures for recording achievements and outcomes for their use in review and development activities.

What is Quality *Assurance*?

If you look at the literature you will see that it is defined as the planned and systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that the education provided will meet the needs of clients. It is a system for ensuring that education outcomes are provided to the required standard within the available resources. Quality assurance seeks to prevent performance problems arising in the first place. Quality assurance is therefore one of the cornerstones of a quality system, a system for managing the quality of what we are attempting to produce.

These definitions of quality systems and quality assurance are conceptual rather than operational. Many different operational strategies can be used to assure the quality of educational outcomes. There does not even need to be consistency in procedures and operations from one part of the system to another. That depends on whether uniform procedures are in fact the best way to achieve the desired quality assurance outcomes. Thus, quality assurance is a way of understanding the effectiveness of structures and processes required to achieve things, it does not seek to prescribe the ways of doing things and does not suggest that we must do things in the same way across different parts of the system.

What Does it Take to Assure Quality in a School System?

The core of quality assurance is the implementation of systematic review and development practices to ensure that quality is built–in to what we do. That is, quality assurance must become part and parcel of everything we do. Through this we seek to embed continuous improvement —in Japanese, 'kaizen'—into our everyday work.

The approach of quality assurance, therefore, is very different to the focus of classical inspection systems, which are designed fundamentally to weed out

the substandard and non-conforming practices and services before they reach students. As a process, inspection costs money but it makes no direct contribution to the production of quality practices and outcomes. Quality assurance on the other hand focuses directly on the production of quality outcomes—as the literature says, first time, all of the time.

Quality Assurance is Your Business

It is of utmost importance that we recognise that quality assurance is part of everybody's business. I estimate that the Department of School Education spends at least $50m a year on quality assurance. This calculation assumes that a relatively small portion of the normal duties of all of us is directly quality assurance orientated.

What then are the implications of this for a school system? An important message of the quality literature is that each one of us must take responsibility for ensuring that what we individually produce is fit for use by those whom we service. And we must also take responsibility, individually, for ensuring that the services and products that we receive from others are fit for our use. We cannot produce quality outcomes ourselves if we do not get quality services and inputs from others. This means building quality in to every link in the chain.

Characteristics of a System for Managing Quality in Schools

The key characteristics of a system for managing quality in schools are shown in the table below. Schools need to focus on their clients by looking to the needs of their client groups in determining the direction and development of the school. In general, the needs of a school community are a conflicting mix of needs, but it is our challenge to satisfy them. Schooling is not a single product service, as some industries are. We must meet the varied educational needs of all of our school communities.

Schools require direction and purpose provided through effective leadership, which among other things, leads to focussed involvement and ownership of the school's development program by its stakeholder groups. Decision making for both day-to-day management and future development should be based on quality evidence and data which is systematically collected and analysed.

An emphasis on process focuses the school on the performance of the whole system so that its overall performance is more than the sum of its parts, that is, it ensures there is some advantage gained from the various faculties and parts of the school working together as a system. The characteristic of continuous development is a key feature of organisations that learn from their experience in the present and past. Such schools take a proactive approach to

planning and constructing their future, rather than reactively responding to changes in their environment and situation.

Characteristic of the Quality System		Organisational Dimension
Client focus	→	External
Direction & purpose	→	Leadership
Focussed involvement	→	Ownership
Quality evidence and data	→	Decision Making
An emphasis on process	→	Systems Perspective
An emphasis on outcomes	→	Achievement of Objectives
Building in continuous improvement	→	Learning Organisation
Proactive planning	→	Constructing the Future

The experience of schools which have implemented a quality system along the lines outlined above has shown that certain strategies are particularly important to building and maintaining that system. These strategies are reinforced by findings from the school effectiveness literature:[3]

- clear and shared vision of what students are to learn in the school
- a means for translating the vision into a strategic development plan for the school
- ownership of the vision for development by all stakeholders in the school community
- action plans as *working* documents to implement the school development plan
  - these indicate who is responsible, for what, and by when

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[3] See for example the recent reviews by Reynolds and Levine in Reynolds and Cuttance (eds) School Effectiveness: Research, Policy and Practice. London: Cassell. 1992.

- identification of the professional skills and knowledge required by staff to implement the school's development program, and the provision of opportunities for staff to engage in this professional development process
- structures and processes for monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of strategies for school development
- provision for interactive feedback from the monitoring process to the implementation process
- an annual review and evaluation of progress
  - taking stock of the plans for further development in the school.

A commitment to development and training is vital if the school is to ensure that all staff are capable of and do achieve the outcomes that are stated in school plans. Such professional development needs to be integrated into the school's everyday operation in a way that allows individual staff to learn from colleagues and provides access to external sources of knowledge and skills.

Planning and development processes within schools should involve the community. Strategic plans for development require following through with day-to-day monitoring and more extensive progress reviews to ask whether or not the school is achieving its intended outcomes for students. The planning, development and review cycle provides the basis for interactive feedback in a continuous development cycle.

Quality Systems Outside of Schools

Outside of schools there are statewide, regional and district quality systems. These are implemented through the key roles of cluster directors, consultants and other staff who have accountabilities to see that the needs of schools are met through the provision of appropriate services and programs. These roles are responsible for the provision of quality services to schools in a range of areas: curriculum, school development, student services, financial advice, etc. All of these roles must contribute to the quality assurance of the school system through servicing the quality system across schools in regions.

On a broader canvass, systemic monitoring, audit, review and performance management has the task of assuring that the quality system itself is performing at the level required. This systemic assurance of the quality system is undertaken through assessments of the effectiveness of individual programs and services; the development of individual schools and reviews of the extent to which they are meeting the education needs of their communities; and though assessing the performance of the school system in achieving the policy objectives of government.

Developing Quality Systems in Schools and at the System Level

A range of strategies are already in place or are planned for implementation in the immediate future to meet these ends. Quality practices in schools include school renewal plans and management plans of various sorts—such as action plans. Most schools now regularly review their development and performance through an annual program review process. Staff development and performance agreements in schools and the quality assurance reviews of individual schools will also add to that process. Increased control over professional development funds has been granted to schools so that they may use these resources more flexibly to meet the demands of their strategic development and management plans. The annual reports by schools to their communities are important in keeping the latter informed of the progress being made and providing them with a basis for indicating whether their school is meeting their education needs. Effective structures for community participation are being developed through the establishment of school councils, and parent and community organisations, which have been in place for some time. School communities will also gain an additional source of information and further involvement in schools through their direct participation in quality assurance reviews of schools.

On the broader canvas, systemic monitoring and evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the implementation of programs and services provided to schools. There will also be systemwide evaluations of the effectiveness of individual programs. In the past such program evaluations have been driven by the framework of evaluations required by the Office of Public Management of all government departments. However, this requirement has cast evaluation primarily in an accountability framework for government. In essence, such evaluations have been a vehicle for providing the basis for government reporting to parliament on the probity of government expenditure.

A somewhat broader perspective on the purposes and framework for program evaluations has, however, emerged more recently. This starts not by asking whether individual programs have achieved their objectives, but by asking whether the needs of the public as client and consumer have been met in the areas for which government has responsibility. In this framework, evaluation of achievement of the objectives of individual programs is replaced by a client focus as the essential terms of reference for the evaluation. This addresses one of the key problems of program reviews under the previous framework—*viz* the problem of whether policy outcomes are being achieved across programs.

The Role of the Quality Assurance Directorate

The key role of the Quality Assurance Directorate is to ensure the continuous development of effective quality systems in schools and at the system level. This will entail working with school communities to assess the effectiveness of their quality systems and providing assessments of the effectiveness of the quality system at organisational levels beyond that of the school—regions and the Department as an integrated system.

The collaborative work with school communities will centre around an assessment of the following:

- how the school goes about the task of meeting the community's needs for education, in the context also of addressing statewide priorities for student outcomes
- what the school is attempting to achieve for its community
- how the school knows it is achieving what it has set out to do
- how the school responds to what it knows about its achievements.

Quality assurance reviews of individual schools will thus focus on the way in which they are providing for their community's education needs. They will focus directly on student outcomes and on the quality system for their improvement. In this context they will focus on effective management and leadership in schools, communication and the community participation within the perspectives and constraints of statewide priorities and resources.

The assessment of the effectiveness of services and programs provided to schools will be undertaken as part of the broader evaluation of how well the various directorates are responding to the needs of schools. This will entail an assessment of the extent to which programs and services are integrated to meet the demands that schools have for external support.

The quality assurance framework will place the needs of students and parents at the centre of the assessment of the effectiveness of quality systems in schools and the needs of schools at the heart of assessments of the effectiveness of quality systems at the Department level. Systemic assessments based on both of the above will then be employed to assess the extent of achievement of government policy outcomes.

In 1993 the Quality Assurance Directorate will work first with schools through a consultative processes to develop a quality assurance processes to provide a constructive contribution to the development of individual schools and assure the quality of student outcomes. It will not do this through inspection processes, but through a constructive process which engages with the actual development process itself in schools.

In terms of program and service reviews, the Quality Assurance Directorate will focus on school communities as the clients of the services and programs that are provided to schools. Systemic monitoring will draw attention to

processes and outcomes which require improvement and will provide a global picture of the balance of achievements across the spectrum of all of the objectives that as a system we are seek to achieve in meeting government policy objectives.

Discussion

In concluding, I say that we have set out on a journey to become a world class education system. Quality assurance itself fundamentally aims to provide a compass to assist in navigating out way through the challenging terrain of the last decade of this second millennium.

Finally, to return to the question raised in the title of this paper—can we be assured that the sun will continue to rise for education? Quality assurance is a key component in the broader quality system that is required for schools to maximise the learning outcomes for students. Just as we cannot guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow, so we cannot guarantee that we will maximise the learning outcomes of students. Provided, however, that the general environment of schooling in the past has relevance to that of the present and future, we can proceed on the basis that the best route forward is through the development of systems that seek continual improvement by trying and testing the effectiveness of what we know to be best practice. The effectiveness of practice in school systems is context dependent, thus it is crucial that what is *best* in a particular situation is reviewed and evaluated in the light of experience. Best practice does not only refer to discrete tasks, it also refers to the constellation of activities and processes that make for an effective school.